

Simple Sauerkraut Making

Written by Rebecca Auclair
Monday, 10 February 2014 21:46

In order to make sauerkraut, this is all you need: two ingredients, time, patience, and sensitivity.

Keep reading if you want more details!

Gather your equipment:

- sharp knife
- cutting board
- stainless steel bowl (optional)
- fermenting vessel (find more information below in **Notes about fermenting vessels**) which I will refer to as “crock”

- a plate that closely fits inside your crock
- a large jar filled with water as a weight
- a food processor with slicing blade or mandolin slicer (all optional)

Be sure that everything is “kitchen clean.” You do not need to sterilize your equipment.

Gather your ingredients:

- Fresh green cabbage: the fresher the better. The best sauerkraut will come from cabbage just picked out of your own garden. Grocery store cabbage will work great, too.

- Non-iodized salt. Celtic sea salt is my favorite! Sea salt, pink sea salt, canning salt, etc all work well.

Method:

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Cut, quarter and core one cabbage head. Thinly slice the cored quarters using the method of your choice. A nice big mandolin slicer over a sturdy ceramic crock on the front porch in the late fall is a wonderful aesthetic. It is also calming, great for the breathing and for the environment. I use my Robot Coupe food processor on my kitchen counter. To do this, I cut the cabbage quarters into pieces that will fit into the Robot Coupe's feeder tube, and then, with the slicer blade and continuous feeder attachment in place, I shred all of the cabbage I can manage.

Place one-half to one shredded cabbage into your crock, sprinkle about a tablespoon of salt across the surface and begin mixing and pounding. The technique is much like mixing and kneading bread dough-- scoop down to the bottom and bring that cabbage toward the top, pound the new top into the middle and rotate the vessel. Repeat the process all the way around your crock: scooping, pressing, pounding, turning. Make sure that there are no dry pockets where cabbage has been compressed but not salted or mixed.

Once the cabbage and salt is well mixed, scoop out a pinch, and taste it. The mixture should be pleasant tasting, even at this stage. I know I have used the right amount of salt if the mixture tastes just a little too salty.

Repeat this process (core, shred, layer, salt, mix, repeat) until you have run out of cabbage, run out of salt, or run out of oomph in your arms. Your crock should be no more than $\frac{3}{4}$ full.

When you are done mixing cabbage and salt, flatten the top of the salted cabbage in your crock by pressing/pounding the whole mixture toward the bottom of your crock and scrape down the sides. You want your salted cabbage to be compressed as much as possible and level. Usually, the cabbage and salt will have created their own brine by this time.

Place the plate on top of the salted cabbage and put a weight to the top of the plate to keep cabbage compressed and submerged in brine, if you have enough brine to cover it. You may have to press down on the weight to encourage the brine to rise and the cabbage and plate to sink.

Cover the crock with a cloth and secure it with an elastic or string to keep dust and bugs out.

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Set it in a place where it will be out of the way, but close enough to a sink for the maintenance that follows. Think good thoughts.

The next day, check on your salted cabbage. Remove and rinse the weight. Skim any foam/scum that is floating on the surface. Then, remove and rinse and the plate. Skim any more foam that is on top of the salted cabbage. Have a taste and ask yourself, "Is it salty enough? Is it too salty?" If you don't know by day two, don't despair-- you still have time. Return the plate and the weight to the crock. If you don't have enough brine in your crock to cover the plate now, add salted water at this dilution: 1 ½ tablespoon of salt for 2 cups of water. Use more or less salt in your supplemental brine based on whether your mixtures is too salty, not salty enough, or just right.

Continue to check your crock daily, rinsing the plate and weight and skimming any scum, if necessary. At a certain point, the microbes and salt seem to balance out, and you'll notice that foam and scum have stopped forming. Don't rest on your laurels at this point, especially when you are just learning. Check your brine level and rinse your weight and plate every few days, even if you don't need to skim or add anything. This kind of maintenance will slow and reduce any mold growth. Taste every few days and add brine as needed.

The amount of time that your sauerkraut needs to ferment depends on a few different factors: the bacterial population in your house, the temperature, the amount of salt that you use, and your personal preference. I often start eating my kraut after it has fermented for about 2 weeks. I fill up a jar, smooth over the top on my crock again and leave the bulk of it to continue to ferment. I put the jar in the fridge and eat it at this younger stage and continue to enjoy forays into the crock as I run out. I typically put the contents of the crock in cool storage when I am first beginning to worry that it might be getting a little punky. Then it is at its best! This is my taste, and when you make your own sauerkraut, you get to decide what you like. I like my sauerkraut to be fairly sour, mildly salty and soft. Many people like their kraut crunchy and not too salty. I encourage you to experiment with different styles and types of sauerkraut to determine the style that suits you best.

Some potential problems:

"Oh no, it's too salty!" This is a totally fixable problem. You have two options: 1) Best option-- shred up more cabbage and mix it into your crock or 2) Slight pain-in-the-neck option-- remove a portion of your salted cabbage, rinse it in a mesh strainer, return it to your crock and mix it

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back in. Taste the salted cabbage the next day and assess the salt level again.

“Eeewww! It's moldy!” Again, you'll probably be alright, especially IF YOU DON'T PANIC! (He-hee!) Remove the weight and skim the surface mold as thoroughly as you can. You won't be able to get every speck of the mold, but do the best you can. Then remove the plate and check the surface of your kraut. It may be totally fine or it may have a little mold on it. The former is more likely IF you remember to keep your brine level high enough so that your plate is submerged. If you have mold on the surface of your kraut, begin peeling and gently scraping back the layers of moldy sauerkraut. Soon you will arrive at sauerkraut that looks, smells and tastes fine. Check along the sides of your sauerkraut to make sure there is no mold sneaking down the sides. Return the cleaned plate and weight, and add more brine to be sure everything is submerged. To prevent further mold growth, check your kraut more regularly, skimming the scum and adding brine as needed.

Notes about fermenting vessels:

Nothing beats a ceramic crock. They are beautiful, but before you spend a lot of money on one, remember... THEY ARE HEAVY, especially when they are filled with cabbage and brine. When I first started fermenting, my dad gave me two crocks that he and my aunt had lying around. I finally bought an eight gallon crock at an antique shop that was reasonably priced. Check Good Will, yard sales, Craigslist, etc to find one that fits your needs best.

Don't worry if you don't have a ceramic crock. You have many other options:

- Food grade plastic buckets. Ask at a natural foods store; they might set one aside for you.
- ceramic bowls
- glass jars. I recently bought two large ones with lids at Good Will for \$.99 each.

Sauerkraut variations: Mix red and green cabbage for a beautiful, magenta kraut; add dill weed, dill seed and leeks to make Celtic Kraut a la Louise Fraizer; add shredded root veggies like carrots, daikon, rutabaga and celeriac to make what Sandor Katz would call “kraut-chi;” add beets, ginger and caraway seeds for a Russian-fusion sauerkraut.

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Be brave. Go easy on yourself. If your mixture is delicious in the crock before you ferment it, it will be lovely and amazing with the passage of time. If your mixture is “okay” in your crock, it may turn into something esoteric and wonderful OR you can fix it as you go so it will be delicious when it is done. Sauerkraut-making is incredibly forgiving and flexible, so start small, dream big, taste honestly, and most of all, HAVE FUN. You will surprise yourself with your fantastic creations.

Suggested Reading for fermentation and life:

Katz, Sandor Ellix. *Wild Fermentation: The flavor, nutrition and craft of live-culture foods*. White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2003.

Katz, Sandor Ellix. *The Art of Fermentation: An in-depth exploration of essential concepts and processes from around the world*. White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2012

Fallon, Sally. *Nourishing Traditions: The cookbook that challenges politically correct nutrition and diet dictocrats*. Washington: New Trends Publishing, Inc., 1999

L' Engle, Madeline. *A Wind in the Door*. New York: MacMillan Publishers, 1973.

Oliver, Mary. Books of poetry including: *House of Light, American Primitive and New and Selected Poems, Vol. I*. Take a look at poems like “Wild Geese,” “The Journey,” “The Buddha’s Last Instruction,” “In Blackwater Woods,” “Poem,” “Morning Poem,” and “The Summer Day.”

His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler, MD. *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*. New York: Riverhead Press, 1998.